



George Sugarman: Painted Wood Sculpture

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An exhibition organized by Lisa Phillips, Associate Curator

All statements by the artist are from a recent interview conducted by Lisa Phillips. The text was contributed by Nancy Princenthal, Research Assistant, who also assisted with the organization of the exhibition.

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On the last day of December 1959, George Sugarman completed a seven-foot-tall, polychrome wooden sculpture called *Yellow Top*. This new work exuberantly heralded a radical shift in Sugarman's career. His earlier sculpture, first in terracotta and then in unpainted wood, had suggested his future concerns with open, organic composition. But the vertical sprawl of *Yellow Top*, which resists axial stability with the force of a tornado, and the bright primary colors that distinguish its separate elements clearly established the issues that would involve Sugarman for most of the next ten years.

The importance of Sugarman's new polychrome sculpture was understood almost immediately, even though it was introduced at a time of remarkable ferment among American sculptors. Abstract Expressionism had remained the dominant force in three-dimensional work as well as in painting throughout the 1950s.

Change—notably in the form of Pop and Minimal art—was inaugurated with the new decade. By 1965, when Sugarman had created a significant body of painted wooden sculpture, a number of discussion groups, panels, and at least one cooperative gallery had formed to review recent sculptural production. During one panel discussion in New York, sculptor Phillip Pavia addressed his colleagues in terms redolent of New York School ideology, and met with angry resistance. None of his co-panelists was more displeased than Sugarman. Pavia declared that “spontaneity” was a sculptor's crowning virtue, and “design” a cardinal sin. To Sugarman and to almost everyone else present, from Claes Oldenburg to Isamu Noguchi, the distinction between spontaneity and design seemed at best irrelevant. The cultural debate of the sixties reintroduced the conscious manipulation of formal characteristics in a work of art. Uninhibited expression of the psyche or of physical contingencies, which had been advocated by the Surrealists and their Abstract Expressionist successors, fell under suspicion.

What I didn't understand was why people responded so negatively to the polychromy. It seemed so natural. But then everything I have done seems so easy, so obvious to me. I believe that form is color and color is form, and I was shocked when people were disgusted with it—the over-reaction. Picasso had smeared paint, the Greeks had used paint, what was the big deal?

I know color, and I know what it does. I learned what it does to edges: bright red will kill an edge, yellow will hold it. Black will make it disappear.

Opposite: *Three Forms on a Pole*, 1962
Photograph by ceva-inkeri

Cover: *Inscape*, 1964

I consider myself a very traditional artist. People say I'm crazy, but I think I'm carrying on a certain tradition. In the early days, I said I was against the object, but I went on doing objects, to expand the language of sculpture. It came out of—of course, a lot of things—but it really came out of the open spaces in Cézanne's watercolors. He showed me that space can be form and that is the lesson I learned. It is very simple, but I interpreted it in my own way.

The space is not empty just because there's nothing there. That is what I'm aiming at. When I first started, I tried to do a thing with a group. I couldn't do it. It wound up looking like a huge plateau with a little house on it. I never kept it, but there was always that sense of space to me—it defined space. Space is nothing if it is not defined.



Yellow Top, 1960
87 × 54 × 34. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Gift of the T. B. Walker Foundation. Photograph by Adolph Studly

Deliberation, which sculpture demands more rigorously than painting, was preferred to spontaneous creation.

"Concrete Expressionism" was Irving Sandler's term for the work of Sugarman and the four other artists—Ronald Bladen, Al Held, Knox Martin, and David Weinrib—whom he included in an important (and contentious) 1965 exhibition at New York University. Distinguishing their sculpture on the one hand from the soft and decorative work of such Color Field painters as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, and on the other from the work

of such nihilistic "Cool Artists" as Andy Warhol and Frank Stella, Sandler described Concrete Expressionist sculpture as "self-critical, raw, dynamic and uningratiating." Sandler characterized this work as having "forms [that] are *disassociated*; each is shaped to exist in its own isolated, self-contained space. The unmodulated hues also serve to accent the separateness of the forms."

For Sugarman's work, Sandler's description was especially apt. The sculpture Sugarman produced in the early sixties extended a vocabulary of disjunctive, "non-relational" shapes. In *One for Ornette Coleman* (1961) and, more decisively, in *Four Walls, Five Forms* (1961–62) and *Three Forms on a Pole* (1962), Sugarman arranged discrete sculptural units in uncentered, discursive sequences. Diverse, simple, and complex forms are grouped, as if for family portraits, in a casual cluster (*Four Walls*) or in an almost comically rigid lineup (*Three Forms*) that defy traditions of sculptural organization. "George Sugarman is working with ideas of forms indifferent to one another and colors indifferent to one another," was fellow sculptor James Wines' description of his method.



One for Ornette Coleman, 1961
Photograph by ceva-inkeri

I used to haunt cathedrals—not that I am religious—but the space. Madison Square Garden knocked me out. What do you do with it? I love blank walls because you can do something with them. . . . Yes, space is very tactile for me, I really feel it and react to it.

I love jazz, and one of my pieces was even named for Ornette Coleman. I was so knocked out by him. I am sure that kind of freedom, and the exuberance and constant inventiveness, taught me a lot about rhythms, changes in rhythms, when to stop and when to start again. This is very much a part of my work.

I did *Inscape* and people shook their heads. They said it looks as if it fell from the ceiling. I remember this literally; they also said it looks like a miniature golf course—he doesn't know what he's doing.

More specifically, Sugarman defied Minimalism, which had gained favor by the mid-sixties. "I strongly believe that less is less, and that more, while not always achieving it, has at least a chance of being more," he wrote to Hilton Kramer in 1968. More than ten years earlier, Sugarman had noted in a daybook, "People who say 'Never do a thing with two lines when you can do it with one,' talk nonsense. A thing done with one line is not the same as a thing done with two lines." Sugarman did not promote unrestricted decorative license, and structure remained as important to him as complexity. He found a fruitful challenge in the engineering limits imposed by gravity. But he pushed those limits, and the limits generally understood to govern the visual compatibility of sculptural forms. *Ramdam* (1963), with its cloudlike crowning appendage, and *Rorik* (1965), with its even more dangerously cantilevered figure, are among his most strenuous exercises in congruity and balance.

In articulating the disparate elements of these compound works, Sugarman availed himself of every formal means at hand, including shape, size, texture, and (to the greatest critical acclaim) color. The process of determining these attributes was unified: as Sugarman cut with a band saw, laminated, doweled, ground down, and

sawed the wooden sculptures of the sixties, he chose and refined their colors at the same time. The decision to paint *Yellow Top* was certainly pivotal in Sugarman's career. Along with John Chamberlain, whose crushed car sculptures from 1957 on retained the surviving paint of the auto body parts, and David Smith, who also experimented with polychromy in metal sculpture, Sugarman advanced the role of color in sculpture. But he disavowed the polemical importance of this choice. For him, color was simply a means of clarifying form; as Sandler wrote, "Sugarman alone succeeded in using color as weight to define and augment mass." In fact, Sugarman had little use for the historical boundaries which this kind of painted sculpture transgressed. He admitted that the viewer honors a "psychological," or habitual, distinction between the two- and three-dimensional media. But he remarked in 1965, "One of the reasons sculpture is becoming more important—although this might seem contradictory—is that the distinction between it and painting is becoming minimized."

Sugarman's painted sculpture of the sixties challenged not only sculptural traditions concerning internal organization, but



Bardana, 1962–63

also traditions governing a sculpture's extension in space. In such vertical works as *C-Change* (1965), *Ramdam*, and also such smaller works as *Criss-Cross* (1963) and *Black and a Garland* (1964), he continued to bring discontinuity and asymmetry to bear against columnar composition. Throughout the decade, he expanded, physically and conceptually, the place of sculpture in the viewer's space.

Pedestals were identified by Sugarman early on as obstacles to the integration of sculptural and viewing spaces. In the larger pieces, he avoided them by setting the piece directly on the floor or, as in *C-Change*, he conceived the pedestal as a

sculptural element in itself. In *Bardana* (1962–63), one of his most inventive compositional gambits, Sugarman contrived a diagonal sweep across a square base, from the floor to a point dramatically above and beyond the pedestal.

Sugarman's dissatisfaction with centrally focused form and a desire to engage a wider spatial field than unified standing sculpture generally allows eventually led him to landscape as a model for his work—a model which had also intrigued David Smith.

Remember, you had to change your whole physical perspective. You had to look down at the thing, it was not at eye level. The variety of the forms also affronted people. I said, "If you don't want to deal with it, walk away, but don't be indifferent." And I paid for it.

Two in One is very difficult for people. I said, "Don't worry about it. Just go from one to the other. Just walk along it. Each one is an experience, and if you can't put it together, all right." I used to say that you don't put everything you experience in life together and that's what this is about. If it turned out that there was a hierarchy, all right, that's a fact of life too. I wasn't composing it in that sense.



Axum, 1963
Photograph by Jon Blumb

Inscape (1964), an approximately 9-by-12-foot work whose discrete painted elements are strewn in calculated disorder across the floor, was the first piece in which Sugarman brought this landscape impulse to fruition. Described by Sidney Simon as “a madcap sequence of quite distinctive color-forms . . . as irrepressible in feeling as it is digressive in structure,” *Inscape* was followed two years later by the even bigger and more complex *Two in One*. Sugarman’s resistance to the ideology of Abstract Expressionism notwithstanding, in these “landscape” pieces he explored the same ideas of infinitely extendable, “all-over” composition that Jackson Pollock had investigated in the 1950s. “Even in my vertical or columnar pieces, the space is broken up so that the center of gravity is hard to locate,” Sugarman said in 1965. “In the more horizontal or longitudinal pieces, the implication of the space is that it can go on horizontally as long as I am willing to work on a particular piece.”

Never patient with compromise, by 1967 Sugarman had acted on the implications of the large floor pieces and accepted his first commission for a big, outdoor

public sculpture for the headquarters of Xerox Data Systems in El Segundo, California. Other commissions, notably in St. Paul, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Buffalo, followed. Sugarman’s appetite for large quantities of real space and for direct physical address to a great number of viewers, along with his abiding interest in architecture, contributed to his zeal for public art. These architectural interests ranged from Western Baroque (particularly Bernini) to Islamic, and did not exclude the peculiar architectural phenomenon called New York. As Sugarman noted on his return to New York from Paris in 1955, “the conglomerate but somehow cohesive structure of the city struck me anew. These two factors . . . helped me work toward the idea of a sculpture structured by disparate forms. At the same time, a renewed awareness of the country beyond the city, the openness of the plains, made me look for less formal, even open-ended relationships in sculpture.” In his painted metal outdoor sculpture, Sugarman is able to realize on a grand scale the drama that occurs every time a three-dimensional artwork is encountered.

While working on these commissions, he has continued to produce smaller sculpture, in wood until the end of the sixties, and then in metal. From the early seventies on, he also produced painted metal reliefs.

During the sixties and early seventies people would say, “Oh, you’re just a baroque sculptor.” That was never a dirty word for me because, you know, I loved the Baroque when I saw it. Now, of course, it’s respectable, right?

In Paris, the center of the city is all Haussmann—the same kind of architecture, the same tint. But in New York you have buildings from the twenties up to 1985. Everything is disjunctive—the wildness of it, the excitement—and yet there is a unity. That is where the idea came from, that a thing could be unified even though it was full of different forms.

Kids are wonderful about sculpture. Not that they are critics or anything, but they don't separate the object from their bodies. When they look at my work, they don't question it, they just climb on it. But as they become adults, they separate themselves from it and become afraid of this object. That is why most people don't understand sculpture, I'm convinced. When it is really three-dimensional and *there*, and you have to deal with it almost as if it were a person—it has the personality of the colors—you also know that it is not just the result of emotions, that there are brains, a few brains working behind it. This is very disturbing to most people. That is the difference and it took me many years to understand.

If you walk around to the other side, you should be rewarded for not being lazy. I want to give the spectators something they don't expect.

Criss-Cross, 1963
Photograph by Geoffrey Clements

The sensual appeal of the reliefs' colors and rhythms—uncomplementary and off-beat as they were—along with Sugarman's resistance to traditional hierarchies of "low" to "high" art, helped justify his identification in the mid-seventies with a Pattern and Decoration school, for which he was something of a mentor. Though the cohesiveness of this group was shortlived, it expressed the liberating influence that Sugarman's work exerted at a time when the coloristic and formal restraints of Minimalism still prevailed.

Sugarman's achievements with his painted wood and later sculptures are

most readily understood in formal terms, and the artist is leery of psychologizing interpretations. But his work as a whole inevitably has a distinctive emotional profile, and it is one that was as forcefully at odds with the mood that prevailed when he reached artistic maturity as it is now. In all of Sugarman's work, including the clearly hand-carved, almost totemic vertical pieces, there is an aversion to the romance of primitivism, and indeed to nostalgia or sentimentality of any kind. Instead, his garrulous, colorful, high-keyed sculpture suggests a disposition of rare optimism. In 1966, Amy Goldin wrote that, of the inventiveness and the robustness in Sugarman's work, "it is the robustness . . . that is the more problematic for us." Uninterested in making historical references, Sugarman seems not to be plagued by the doubts and fits of irony which beset artists who keep one eye cast over their shoulders. "I tend to think of [my works] as meeting places," he wrote in 1974, "where forms invented to please the visual imagination find their right colors and are organized into a space that invests them with their most suggestive relationships."



Works in the Exhibition

All works are in painted, laminated wood.
Measurements are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

One for Ornette Coleman, 1961
60 × 30 × 24
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Four Walls, Five Forms, 1961–62
43½ × 47 × 44
Private collection

Three Forms on a Pole, 1962
41 × 57 × 21
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Bardana, 1962–63
96 × 144 × 62
Galerie Renée Ziegler, Zurich

Axum, 1963
35 × 38 × 49
Spencer Museum of Art, The University of
Kansas, Lawrence

Criss-Cross, 1963
41 × 34 × 37
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.51

Ramdam, 1963
122 × 48 × 48
Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern
University; Gift of the estate of the late Robert
B. Mayer and Mrs. Robert B. Mayer

Black and a Garland, 1964
40 × 25 × 21
Collection of Mrs. Robert M. Benjamin

Black X, 1964
44½ × 44½ × 29½
Private collection

Inscape, 1964
28 × 158 × 97
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

C-Change, 1965
114 × 32 × 42
Collection of Albert and Vera Iast, courtesy of
the Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Rorik, 1965
32 × 26 × 15
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Gift of Mr.
and Mrs. David M. Winton

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Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

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